

Swanquarter Bay to Ocracoke Island: 3/15/2012 – 3/18/2012

By Robert M. Granger, II

### Thursday 3/15/2012:

On the week of March 10<sup>th</sup> 2012 I found myself able to take Thursday and Friday off of work and my children were out of school that Friday. I picked the girls up from school Thursday with the boat loaded and ready to go and we found ourselves driving 5 hrs to Swanquarter Bay North Carolina with our sailboat *Dragonfly* in tow. *Dragonfly* is a 1973 MacGregor V22-2 that I picked up for a song and restored two seasons ago. In addition to the extraordinary good fortune of having my schedule and the kids schedules converge, the weatherman was also predicting record high temperatures for the month of March (mid 80<sup>o</sup>s) and SW winds at 10-15kth for Friday and NE winds for Sunday – a broad reach both ways. Perfect! Could it really get any better than that?

I had located a marina on Active Captian that was directly across the sound from Ocracoke Island and now we were driving along the back roads, through the salt marshes of the North Carolina shore in search of Oyster Creek Marina. At 6:30 PM we reached the absolute middle of *nowhere* when our GPS stated “*You have arrived*”. For some time now I had suspected that our GPS was trying to murder us and now I had proof. The only structure in sight was a beaten down cyprus planked shack. But upon inspection, the numbers on the mailbox matched the address we were looking for. There is not much left of Oyster Creek Marina. The proprietor (Glyn Jarvis) informed us that he has been there for 50 years and the last few storms “*have really taken their toll on the place*”. All that is left is a shack, a few serviceable piers and a very narrow launch. However it had what we needed; and the price tag was unbeatable. Glyn charged us a grand total of \$10 and he kept an eye on our van and trailer while we were gone. After squaring things with Glen we made the boat ready while Geln’s two Chihuahua kept us company. Forty five minutes after arriving at Oyster Creek we had the mast stepped, sails bent, *Dragonfly* launched and the outboard at idle. Yes, I have an excellent crew who knows what needs to be done to launch the boat quickly. The mosquitoes were an added incentive to get things done quickly... (mosquitoes in March!!!!) The mosquitoes were *eating us alive* so we decided to anchor out in the creek to get away from land.

The sun was just hitting the horizon over the salt marsh as we dropped anchor and it was glorious sunset.

The wind at anchor was strong enough to keep the mosquitoes at bay so we made the boat ready for the night, heated some Chef Boyardee on the Coleman stove, filled the thermos with hot coffee for the



Oyster Creek Marina's "Office"



Oyster Creek Marina's Ramp.

morning and watched the stars come alive in the blackest sky any of us had ever seen. We tuned in Science Friday on the local NPR station and they happened to be talking about Venus', Jupiter's & Mars' location in the night sky so we popped our heads out of the front hatch and spotted each before ducking back in for the night.

After star gazing for a while it started to get chilly so we hunkered down in our bunks and played a few hands of Quiddler<sup>1</sup> before turning in for the night.

Sometime around 0200 hrs Friday morning the wind died and the mosquitoes found our boat—with a vengeance. My youngest daughter awoke first and mumbled/whined “they’re bugs everywhere”. I turned on the cabin lights to a cloud of mosquitoes. Luckily I have a mosquito netting canopy that drapes over the pop-top enclosure. BUT! there was no point in putting the netting over the boat now since that would just trap them in the boat, so I wrapped the kids and myself in the netting and we were able to get back to sleep. With the exception of the mosquitoes, we had the creek all to ourselves for the entire night until 0600 hrs when a lone bass boat passed our position. He was very thoughtful and slowed down so as not to rock our boat with his wake.



At anchor Thursday night.

### Friday 3/16/2012:

We weighed anchor at approximately 0630 hrs and made way under power out of Oyster Creek and into Swanquarter Bay. We opened all of the hatches to flush out the mosquitoes and then we went on a search and destroy mission to get the last few remaining stowaways. Once we cleared the creek (and killed all of the mosquitoes) we hoisted sail, as the sun rose in the East. We shut down the O.B. and had a fine breakfast of granola bars and coffee while under sail.



Sunrise Friday morning 3/16/2012

The trip to Ocracoke was uneventful and delightful. Just the way I like it. We trolled two yo-yo rigs behind the boat most of the day but we didn’t get a nibble. Each of the girls took a turn at the tiller and we read, watched the wild life and had the whole world to ourselves for 5 hrs. On our passage to Ocracoke we also had time to try out a sheet-to-tiller self steering set up. I’ve always wanted to try it but had never gotten around to it. I had purchased some inexpensive blocks at Tractor Supply so we set it up and we were pleasantly surprised at how well it worked. Once we were on a heading the boat held true, so long as we didn’t shift our positions around on the boat too much.



Trolling with a yo-yo real.

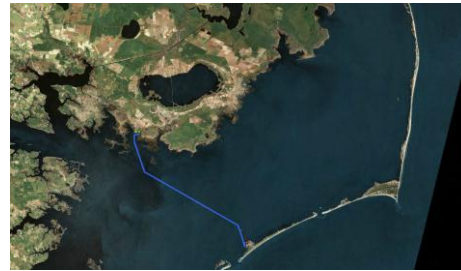
<sup>1</sup> Quiddler is a card game that can best be described as a cross between rummy and scrabble.

We were overtaken by the Swanquarter ferry about 5 knots from the Big Foot Slough (The entrance to Ocracoke Island's Silver Lake) and that was the only boat we had seen all day. We entered the Big Foot Slough channel at approximately 1345 hrs. The entrance to Silver Lake at Ocracoke is tricky with severe shoaling on either side of the channel, so we rolled up the keel just to be on the safe side. If you are not terribly familiar with the buoy conventions you might find the aids to navigation in the Big Foot Slough confusing. The "red, right, return" convention is for ships returning to the mainland. However, the approach to Silver Lake is considered outbound relative to the mainland so the red buoys were to our left as we entered the channel.

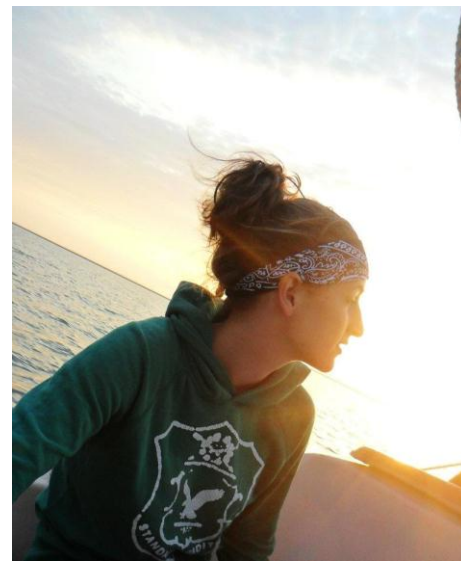
We were about halfway through the channel when a ferry left Silver Lake heading out to the Pamlico Sound so I eased out of the channel to let him pass. He hailed me on channel 16 and told me to veer sharply to port. I obliged and moved to the opposite side of the channel, he hailed me again (more intensity in his voice this time) "you are out of the channel again... you are out of the channel again". . I guess the ferry captain did not know we had a swing keel and he was very concerned about me running aground when he saw me heading out of the channel. I responded with "I'm drawing 12 inches. Which side do you want me to pass you on...". I got a moment of silence followed by "Roger... pass to port". It was nice to know he had my back and I felt a bit guilty that I had caused him some concern.

I had made reservations at the Anchorage Inn and Marina and as I entered Silver Lake, I hailed them on channel 16. The staff met me at the pier and helped me tie off. Since we were pre-season by a few weeks, we were the only visitors at the marina and so the staff let us tie off port-to against the pier. This made for a very easy on & off. The Anchorage Inn and Marina is a nice little marina with clean and well maintained facilities. There are two bath houses across the street, a small convenience store at the end of the pier and a small swimming pool as well. You can also rent bikes right there at the marina for \$10/2hrs. We got settled in and were ready to explore the town by 1430 hrs (that is 2:30 PM for you lubbers).

First stop, the ice cream shop on the corner of Silver Lake Drive and Hwy 12. As we approached the ice cream shop, we saw several people sitting on the front porch but when we arrived at the ice cream shop we discovered that it was still closed for the season and these folks were just enjoying the day. Actually most of the shops on the



Route from Oyster Creek Marina to Ocracoke Island



Everyone took a turn at the tiller



Anchorage Inn & Marina



At the beach Friday late afternoon 3/16/2012



island had not yet opened for the season. However we were greeted by a nice man and his dog *pilot* sitting on the steps of the ice cream shop. We asked him where we could get a bite to eat and he recommended DAJIO's. We also asked him where the closest beach access was located and he gave us good directions. We would learn on Saturday that this nice man's name was Eric.

DAJIO's is an excellent hangout. It is a sports bar with a beach theme. The menu is diverse and we all found something we liked. We sat on a brick-walled patio overlooking the harbor and had a marvelous lunch. We left DAJIO's and stepped into an upscale souvenir/T-shirt shop. This place was a bit nicer than the typical beach souvenir shop and we chatted with a nice elderly lady whom I assume was the owner. She told us that we should try Eduardo's for lunch tomorrow. Eduardo's is a small roadside taco stand. We then walked the backstreets of town (Howard Street) and found several arts and craft stores that were open. Ocracoke boasts a thriving artsy-type community and you can find some really interesting pieces in these shops. These shops are not your typical tourist junk shops, they have some really nice stuff in there and if you ever get a chance to visit Ocracoke I recommend that you nose about in the stores a bit. We continued onto Hwy 12 and walked to beach access #70 and spent an hour on the beach. There were only two other people in sight.

We arrived back at the marina to discover that we had a new neighbor, the *Amazing Grace* was a 34 foot Beneteau that had sailed in from Oriental NC earlier in the day. The sun was hitting the water as we settled in for the evening and we caught a perfect sunset as the local charter sailboat was returning from a sunset cruise.

We took showers, heated some Campbell® soup for dinner, and made the boat ready for the night. We then set about planning how we would spend Saturday. After we settled in, we played a few hands of a variant of euchre called bid euchre, lit a citronella candle and after the girls turned in for the night, I cracked open a Samuel Adams and walked over to the state park and explored their piers for a moment. There was another Beneteau sailboat chartered out of Oriental tied up at the state park. I think we were the only three visitors in Silver Lake that week end. It was a very peaceful night. I sipped my beer and listened to the night sounds.



As I sit at my desk writing this up (I'm supposed to be working :-)) It is hard to imagine now that all of the events mentioned above took place in a single day.

### **Saturday 3/17/2012:**

We had all dozed off by 2130 hrs (9:30PM) the night before so we were up before dawn Saturday. The morning dew was heavy but the boom-tent had kept the dew off of the cockpit so it was nice and dry. I set up my one-burner Coleman stove in the cockpit and prepared to make some coffee. If you are familiar with the old-school Coleman petro stoves, you know that the fuel is preheated by the flame before it reaches the burner head. So for the first few seconds, the flame is large and yellow and then settles into a really hot blue flame. It turns out that the guys up at the dock master's office just happened to be looking my



direction when I lit the stove and saw a large yellow flame under my boom tent, and in the pre-dawn I guess it stood out. The next thing I knew a dock hand was at my boat with a fire extinguisher in hand asking if we were okay. I sheepishly said, just making coffee. I guess he got his adrenaline push early for the day. He returned to the office and I heard his report to the dock master drift across the water *"they were just making coffee"*. Mike (the dock master) yells across the water *"we have hot coffee up here in the office if you want"*. I responded with, *Thank you, maybe tomorrow....* and felt a little embarrassed that I had caused so much fuss so early in the day. We ate granola, trail mix and canned oranges for breakfast and fed the sea gulls crackers while we drank our coffee. An odd looking bird swam circles around our boat while we watched the sun clear the horizon. We later learned that it was a male loon. After breakfast we visited the state park and took a look inside the tourist information house. The ranger helped us identify the loon from a pamphlet on local water fowl and we watched the ferry depart. Next on the agenda was a walk to the lighthouse. The Ocracoke lighthouse was built in 1823 and it is the oldest operating lighthouse in North Carolina. It is not one of the more colorful lighthouses but it is charming nonetheless.



Saturday morning coffee 3/17/2012



Saturday morning coffee 3/17/2012

On our walk up the path to the lighthouse, we met a yellow tabby cat who would not let us pass until we scratched her belly. You see a lot of cats on Ocracoke. At this point the chill in the air had passed and we decided to head back to the beach, but first a stop back at the boat for lunch supplies. We stocked up on bottled water and snacks and were heading back into town when we bumped back into Eric (the guy at the ice cream shop we had met on Friday). Today Eric had a different dog with him. *Sam* was a friendly yellow mutt of a dog and he seemed to enjoy kicking around town with Eric. Eric asked us if we found the beach yesterday and we told him that we had and we were on our way back shortly. At this point Eric handed me his truck keys and insisted that we take his truck (the beach access was a two mile walk). I tried to protest (feebly) at which point he stated...*"hey man! It's an island, it not like you can steal it"*.



Ocracoke Lighthouse in the eyes of Marie



Sitting in front of Eduardo's

Eric said that he was not planning on going anyplace that day and he would not need the truck, so we piled into Eric's Ford F150 and headed to the beach.

On our way to the beach we spotted Eduardo's taco stand and decided to pull up for a roadside taco. Now I'm a big fan of Mexican cuisine so it is no small thing for me to state that Eduardo's has the BEST tacos I have ever tasted. Everything is hand cooked right there on his grill, even the shells. The meat was well seasoned but not too hot and he served them up with his own sauce and hefty slices of avocado. If you are on Ocracoke and spot Eduardo's, STOP and try one (or two or three) of his tacos. After lunch we made it to the beach for a second visit and relaxed for a while. My oldest daughter read a book and my youngest played in the sand. I took a stroll down the beach and ran into a guy named Mike (not the same Mike as the dock master) who told me that he and his wife are opening a souvenir shop where O'Neil's bakery used to be. I guess everyone knows where O'Neils used to be!? ☺ Mike was a chatty guy so I have no doubt he will do just fine in the tourist/souvenir trade. I learned a lot about the local history from Mike, for instance the restaurant where we ate lunch on Friday (DAJIO's) is an acronym for **Doug And Judy In Ocracoke** -- very cool! and the origins of dredge island, a pile of sand just north of the Big Foot Slough was created when they dredged Big Foot Slough. Go figure! After about two hours at the beach we decided to head back into town. I stopped at Tradewinds Tackle shop on the way back into town and picked up a new spoon (fishing lure) for my yo-yo rigs and then a quick stop at the "variety store" to pick up a 6-pack of something nice for Eric, a token of appreciation for letting us use his truck. After returning the truck, we found Eric sitting on the pier picking his guitar with his dog Sam at his side. We sat and chatted with Eric for a bit, listened to him play his guitar a bit (he is actually pretty good) and sometime during this visit, I finally learned Eric's name. It seems odd as I write this down to think that I borrowed a truck from a guy and I didn't even know his name but at the time it didn't seem so strange. Ocracoke is a magic place. I tried to thank him with a 6-pack of Samuel Adams but Eric told me he doesn't drink. Eric suggested I hand them out at the pier, always a good way to make new friends ☺ and if not...oh well, more for me....I hope the thought counted. It was about 1330 hrs at this point so we headed back to the boat dock and rented some bikes from Mike the dock master. I guess things were slow or maybe everyone on Ocracoke is amazingly laid back but Mike gave us the bikes for \$10 each for the remainder of the day. He also got out the village map and showed us some fun places to go. First stop on the bikes was Springer's Point Preserve. This is a neat little corner of the Island with ancient live oak and cedar trees along with other coastal fauna. It is a truly beautiful spot. The lagoon off of Springer's point is the supposed anchorage of Blackbeard the Pirate.



Springer's Point

After we left Springer's Point, we visited the back streets of Ocracoke and discovered a very nice neighborhood where all of the houses are on canals. I'd have a hard time going to work each day if I lived in one of those houses.

We got back to the boat around 1700 hrs and while the girls washed off the sun screen and the beach, I made the boat ready for our sail home the next morning. We needed to leave before first light because the girls had school Monday morning and we had a 6 hour sail, then had to load the boat on the trailer and make her ready for the haul and then a 6 hour drive home. We cooked dinner on the bow of the boat (Ravioli from a can) and we enjoyed another beautiful sunset. As the sun got low in the sky, the temperature dropped and a chill entered the air. The girls wrapped themselves up in the sleeping bags and hung out on the pier.



Saturday evening

### **Sunday 3/18/2012:**

The plan was to leave by 0530 hrs so I was up by 0500 hrs only to discover a very thick fog had engulfed Silver Lake. Visibility was about 30 yards. The channel out of Silver Lake and into the Pamlico is a bit tricky with several very sharp turns and I was even more thankful for the swing keel on my boat. The girls were asleep so I knocked about as silently as I could. I had put coffee into the thermos the night before, so it didn't take me long to get underway. I settled my bill with the dock hand and he came over to help me push off. He was a younger man in his early 20's and he proceeded to give me some good advice. *"I don't want to tell you your business but I wouldn't go out in this fog if I were you. Even the ferry captains and charter captains don't go out in heavy fog"*. I knew he was giving me good advice but I proceeded to hum and haw about my swing keel and my tight schedule and he then said to me. *"In my short life, I've known three marine accidents and they all had one thing in common – a deadline"*. He was right of course.... but I had a dead line. The girls were still asleep and I slipped the outboard into gear and idled out of Silver Lake with my bow pointing towards the green flashing beacon that just managed to break through the fog at the mouth to Silver Lake. When I got to the first beacon, I spotted the next and pointed my boat towards that one. This wasn't going to be soooo hard! (?) I made the second turn and then things got tougher.... I could not spot the next mark. I tried to carefully watch my compass and my hand held GPS but after a short while I was no longer certain if I was still in the channel or not. And there is something spooky about fog... Twice I thought I saw a large sailboat silently slipping to starboard about 50 yards off of my bow. I was just able to make the flashing green at the mouth of Silver Lake so I decided to head back into Silver Lake until the fog lifted a bit. I hailed the Marina on 16 and they met me at the dock and helped me tie up. The girls were still asleep and I just sat in my boat and watched Ocracoke wake up. Around 0900 hrs, the skipper of *Amazing Grace* woke up and when he spotted me he said *"I thought you were going to leave at first light"*. I told him of my misadventure in the early morning fog. The *Amazing Grace* had plotted "foot prints" on their GPS coming in and offered to guide me through the channel when they shoved off. I'll have to make that trick part of my SOP the next time I make landfall. So we left in a convoy at 0930 hrs with the *Amazing Grace* in the lead and *Dragonfly* following close behind. We made the mouth of Big Foot Slough without incident, pointed our nose to a bearing of 330 and we hailed goodbye to *Amazing Grace* on channel 78.

The fog was still very thick and we were now 4 hrs behind schedule. Additionally, the weather prediction of a nice 10 – 15 mph wind out of the NE did not materialize. Instead we had a very light SW wind on our nose. I don't know if it was the drum of the motor or just plain exhaustion from the full two days of adventure we had just completed but the girls slept most of the way across the sound. So I had a peaceful 4 hrs all to myself in the cockpit. I have a cooler that I can access from a hatch in the back of the cockpit so I ate a lunch of Oscar Mayer ham and a coke. We arrived at our launch site at 1430 hrs and had the boat on the trailer and ready to haul by 1500 hrs. I'm certain I hit a homerun on the dad-o-meter because on the ride home, the girls were planning our next trip. Tangier Island sounds large on the list or maybe a trip from Elizabeth City to Manteo and then back to Ocracoke! We were home and in our own beds by 2200 hrs.

**Additional Photos:**



Dani & Marie on the pier



Dani at Springer's Point



Marie at the tiller

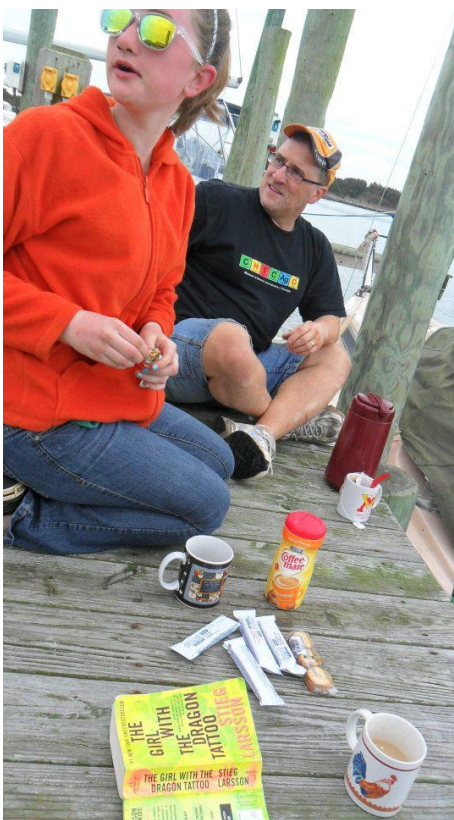




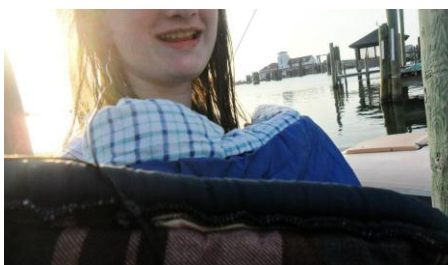
Dani & Rob in Maries Eyes



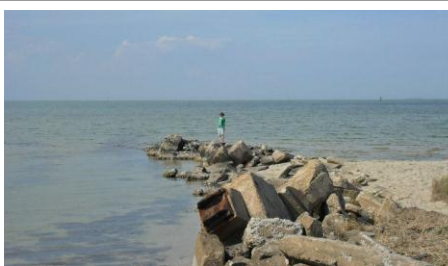
Sign on a building (Bike Ride)



Breakfast Saturday morning



Marie in her bag



Marie at Springer's Point



A walk down the backstreets



Pier at the state park



Boats at anchor in Silver Lake



Sunrise Friday morning



Sunset Friday night